



## Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain

**13 | Printemps 1999**  
**CRITIQUE D'ART 13**

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# Expressionism, or: Art seen from Within

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Translator: Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2492>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2492

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

### Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 1999

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

### Electronic reference

Catherine Wermester, « Expressionism, or: Art seen from Within », *Critique d'art* [Online], 13 | Printemps 1999, Online since 29 March 2012, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2492> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2492

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This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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# Expressionism, or: Art seen from Within

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Bloess, Georges. *Voix, regard, espace dans l'art expressionniste*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998, (Esthétiques)

Ferrier, Jean-Louis. *Paul Klee*, Paris : Terrail, 1998

Pehnt, Wolfgang. *Architecture expressionniste*, Paris : Hazan, 1998

Otto Dix. *Metropolis*, Saint-Paul-de-Vence : Fondation Maeght, 1998

- 1 The laconic title of Wolfgang Pehnt's book, published in a carefully edited and excellent French translation, is *Architecture expressionniste*. The author, an architectural historian, offers a genealogy that is at once richly documented and generously illustrated. The effective organization of the layout—chronological, with name entries of the period's major architects—, the ample notes and bibliography and, last but not least, the inclusion of two indexes—the first for names, the second for buildings and projects—all clearly point to the author's declared aim, which is to make this second edition, which has been revised and enlarged in comparison with the 1973 edition, a work of reference for the subject, and one that is straightforward to consult. The fact is that the concept of "Expressionist architecture" may now have been admitted in Germany, but the same cannot be said for France, where specialists who are on the whole prepared to acknowledge "Expressionist trends" in a certain number of projects and works by German architects, most of them occurring in the 1920s, are, conversely, very reluctant when it comes to a concept invented by criticism, the use of which—often regarded as improper or exorbitant—anyway lacks any adequate foundation in architectural terms. In 1913, when the art historian and critique Adolf Behne contrasted "Impressionist architecture" with "Expressionist architecture" or Bruno Taut's architecture, which was created "from within", he actually merely borrowed for his own purposes an antithesis—albeit a fairly

handy one—that had been used since 1910 to talk about the emergent new painting. This, as W. Pehnt reminds us, was made all the easier because the German architects of the 1910s and 1920s, who are very well represented in his book, belonged to the same groups and featured in the same magazines and journals as those German artists and writers who were explicitly qualified as “Expressionists” from 1914 on.

- 2 Whatever the case may be, and for the non-specialist at least, the reproductions of drawings and paintings by architects, produced around 1920, in fact enable us to make a certain number of comparisons with works produced in this same period by Expressionist painters and poets: all showed the same glorification of sensation and feeling over rational construction, the same tendency to destroy points of reference and fixed landmarks, the same rejection of spatial and chromatic codes and conventions, and the same rejection of harmony and naturalism. Last of all, they also showed the same desire to bring together things that had ended up separated, the same desire to do away with the contrast between void and solid, and the boundaries between exterior and interior.
- 3 *Voix, regard, espace dans l'art expressionniste*, by the aesthetician and Germanist Georges Bloess, deals with the innermost nature of the creative process. It bypasses any history of Expressionist art, other than a history that is reconstructed between the lines, linked with the names of painters and poets referred to in the text. German Expressionists, therefore, but not exclusively. For there is also discussion of the Romantics, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Symbolists, Giacometti, Matisse, Derain, and Peter Handke, not forgetting Paul Celan, who, as it were, introduces and concludes Georges Bloess's essay, as if suggesting a circularity akin to the circular pattern of art.
- 4 A kind of *family* is accordingly formed, encompassing German artists and, over and beyond these boundaries, painters and poets who are linked together by a creative kinship.
- 5 The author has compiled a large number of excerpts from private diaries, letters and, above all, poems, where the rhythms and motions of the creative process are expressed with impressive force. The reader accordingly discovers or re-discovers—reproduced in the original tongue—valuable and exciting material which shows the extent to which the real and genuine subject of art lies at the root of art itself, and the limits to which artists often push their mental adventure.
- 6 Otto Dix tended to be more reticent, in his neo-objective period, about what Georges Bloess elsewhere calls the “powers of subjectivity”. He allowed himself to be gradually circumscribed by the controlled painting which he had espoused in the mid-1920s, before reverting to the more spontaneous art of his early days. Rainer Beck, the eminent specialist on this painter, and author, in the catalogue accompanying the major *Otto Dix* exhibition recently organized at the Maeght Foundation, of an article titled “The Post-1933 Years”, quotes the artist who himself commented on the far-reaching change that had occurred in his painting in the early 1940s: “(...) The spatiality of form gives way to the spatiality of colour and colours start to produce ‘sounds’. (...) I paint ‘unbridled’”. These were Otto Dix's very words and it is very much to the credit of a book such as Georges Bloess's that it allows them to be properly heard. It must nevertheless be admitted that the author of *Voix, regard, espace dans l'art expressionniste* is more at home with poetry than with painting. So when he has discussed “The Poets' eye” and “poetic writing being subordinate to vision”, which, as he himself writes, may well call into question “the age-old hierarchy of the arts” (?), Georges Bloess does indeed focus on “The

writing of painters”, with an almost exclusive interest in their writings properly so-called and that habit they have of ‘signing their works’, and this takes us aback somewhat. For, in the end of the day, is not the writing of painters and of Expressionist painters in particular, also and above all the fretwork of touches, the apparently pell-mell inscriptions which nevertheless *generate* a pictorial space, which differs from perspectival space, is the mark of mental space, and lies altogether within the creative act? If you have any doubts about this, all you need to do is read, hear and see once more the polyphonic works of Paul Klee.